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## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Department of Health Investigating Hepatitis C Cases in Ward County**

BISMARCK, N.D. – The North Dakota Department of Health is investigating a cluster of acute (meaning recent infection) Hepatitis C virus (HCV) cases in Ward County. The three cases were identified in two women and one man, all older than 60.

“Most of the Hepatitis C cases reported to the Department of Health are categorized as chronic cases, meaning the patients may have been infected years ago and may or may not have ever experienced symptoms of the disease. A case categorized as acute means the person was recently infected,” said Lindsey VanderBusch with the North Dakota Department of Health’s Division of Disease Control. “It’s unusual to have three acute cases show up within a few months and all within the same geographic area. That’s why we are investigating the cases to determine if there was a possible connection.”

Testing has indicated that the virus from the three cases is genetically linked, indicating a possible common source. However, at this time, no source has been identified. Health officials are currently working to identify how these individuals were exposed and if there is a common source. Moving forward, any possible associations between these cases will be evaluated. Additional people who may have things in common with these cases may also be considered at risk for having Hepatitis C infection. The North Dakota Department of Health will be contacting anyone who may be associated with these cases to be tested for hepatitis C. Those who are considered at risk will be contacted by phone or mail and given guidance about testing procedures. If you are not contacted regarding testing, there is no recommended action to take.

It’s important to note that Hepatitis C is not spread easily from person to person and is not spread through the air when people cough or sneeze. Hepatitis C is spread primarily through direct exposure to blood or blood products from an infected person. Anyone can get hepatitis C, but those at greater risk include:

- Current or past injection drug users.
- Recipients of clotting factors (products given to help blood clot) made before 1987.
- Hemodialysis patients.

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- Recipients of blood and/or solid organs before 1992.
- Infants born to infected mothers.

Hepatitis C is a viral infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis C virus. Hepatitis C can lead to lifelong (chronic) infection and can cause serious liver damage (cirrhosis or liver cancer) and death. About 80 percent of people infected with HCV have mild or no signs or symptoms initially. Symptoms may include tiredness, loss of appetite, nausea, abdominal discomfort, vomiting, dark urine or jaundice (i.e., yellowing of skin or whites of eyes). Some people recover fully, but 55 percent to 85 percent of infected people carry the virus in their blood for a lifetime and develop chronic infection.

Health officials will continue to investigate these cases and conduct testing of individuals as necessary. Additional testing will help to determine if there is a connection between the confirmed cases, and if there are other people in the community who have been infected.

People who have hepatitis C should remain aware that their blood and possibly other body fluids are potentially infective. Care should be taken to avoid blood exposure to others by not sharing toothbrushes, razors, needles or any other objects that may have become contaminated with blood. In addition, infected people must not donate blood and should inform their health-care providers so that proper health care can be provided.

For more information, contact Lindsey VanderBusch, North Dakota Department of Health, at 701.328.4555. Information about HCV can be found by visiting [www.ndhealth.gov/disease/Hepatitis/](http://www.ndhealth.gov/disease/Hepatitis/).

– 30 –

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